

Class Act: Macaulay's Whig Interpretation of Horatius Cocles¹

The use of ancient Roman literature as propaganda transcends cultures, borders, and eras from the Augustan age to Fascist Italy and even to 19th-century Britain. Thomas Macaulay's 1842 poem *Lays of Ancient Rome* reinterprets the messages of ancient sources to fit the political state of Britain at the time of writing. The *Lays* contain four main episodes inspired by Roman history: *Horatius Cocles*, *The Battle at Lake Regillus*, *Virginia*, and *The Prophecy of Capys*. For the sake of this paper, I will focus on the first poem in his collection, *Horatius*, which draws inspiration from the Roman period story of Horatius Cocles.

There are two main sources of the Horatius Cocles story in the classical tradition— one from the Roman historian Livy in his *Ab Urbe Condita* and the other from the Greek historian Polybius' *Histories*. This paper focuses on the telling from Livy's source as it has the most similarities to Macaulay's poem, and the Polybius version does not directly relate to any aspect of Macaulay's version as discussed in this paper. Since Macaulay's version compares Roman tradition to the state of British politics in the 19th century and follows Livy's account closely, it is possible he did not reference Polybius' version at all. Livy's version of the Horatius Cocles story follows a soldier, Horatius, on guard as the Etruscans ambush the Roman Capitol. While all

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of the other soldiers flee from the invading Etruscans, Horatius charges onto the only bridge that stops the Etruscans from invading Rome, and he begins to fight the entire Etruscan army alone. Shame inspires two men, Titus Herminius and Spurius Lartius, to stand and fight with him. As the bridge nears collapse, Horatius tells them to return to safety. When the bridge crumbles, Horatius prays to the god of the Tiber to save him, and he jumps off the bridge and swims to safety. The state and citizens award Horatius for bravery with land, a statue, and personal possessions (Livy *AUC* Book 2).

In Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*, he retells the story of Horatius Cocles following Livy's source closely. His poem's first episode "Horatius" begins with Lars Porsena mounting an attack against the Romans which causes all of the Romans on guard at the time to flee. A messenger relays this to a consul who attempted to order the Pons Sublicius to come down before realizing that they would not be able to get it down in time. Horatius, captain of the gate, calls out for the bridge to come down while he and two others hold off the Etruscan army. Spurius Lartius and Titus Herminius volunteer to fight alongside Horatius. After they have killed several Etruscans, Sextus approaches the three, and the Roman fathers call them back. Lartius and Herminius leave, while Horatius remains as the bridge comes down. Horatius prays to Father Tiber, jumps into the river, and swims back to safety. Sextus is enraged, but Lars Porsena commends Horatius' bravery. The Romans commemorate Horatius' bravery with a statue in the Comitium and as much land as two oxen can plow in a day.

From these summaries, the stories remain structurally similar with the same basic plot; however, Macaulay includes minor details in his poem that alter the original message of

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Livy's version of Horatius Cocles. While these changes may seem insignificant, they fundamentally transform the meaning of the work through recharacterization and contextualization. This paper will examine how Macaulay's retelling of the Horatius Cocles story strays from ancient literary tradition to suit his political agenda by analyzing the differences between Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* and the Horatius Cocles story from Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* and interpreting how these differences promote Macaulay's Whig political agenda.

British Politics in the 1830s

Before analyzing the poem, the historical context of Macaulay's work provides essential background for understanding Macaulay's political motivations. In the decade leading up to Macaulay's 1842 *Lays of Ancient Rome*, discontent grew within the British lower and middle classes over voting districts and representation. At the time, Britain struggled with "rotten boroughs," voting districts with so few voters that those running for office could easily buy their way to success. Meanwhile, industrial cities with large working-class populations – such as Birmingham or Manchester – received no parliamentary representation. As a result, Britain divided into two main political parties: the Tories, who supported the retention of power in the aristocracy, and the Whigs, who supported moral reforms in favor of the lower class, such as increased voting rights and the abolition of slavery.

In this political divide, Macaulay firmly supports the Whigs through his work as a British historian and politician. Macaulay served in several British offices including as a Member of Parliament for Leeds in 1833, a first law member of the Governor-General's Council in 1834, and as the Secretary of

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War in 1839. As a Whig politician, Macaulay delivered speeches in support of the Whig political party, but his 1831 speech on the Reform Bill of 1832 captured the essence of Whig policy regarding class representation in Britain. In this speech, Macaulay advocates for lowered income restrictions on voting rights. At the same time, he opposes universal suffrage, believing that the British middle class should receive the right to vote but not lower-class individuals. Despite the limitations of Macaulay's ideas regarding who deserves suffrage, his ballad, the *Lays of Ancient Rome* promotes increased social unity between economic classes as long as they fit his ideas.

Characterization & Class Division

Macaulay's Whig ideas involve decreasing income restrictions on voting and reducing class division, which he promotes in the Horatius episode of the *Lays of Ancient Rome* by slightly changing some elements of the original story, including Horatius' title and the characterization of Spurius Lartius and Titus Herminius, to demonstrate the benefits of class unity.

In Livy and Macaulay's accounts of the Horatius Coclus story, Horatius belongs to a different social class than Lartius and Herminius. In both versions, Horatius possesses minimal accolades and no family titles, but Macaulay and Livy note Lartius and Herminius' noble backgrounds in their separate accounts. In *Ab Urbe Condita*, Livy refers to Horatius as a "farmer-soldier" (Shelton, 4), further separating Lartius and Herminius from Horatius regarding character and expectations. Livy calls attention to Horatius' social status to emphasize the virtues of farmers in Roman society, such as diligence, austerity, and discipline. In the *Lays of Ancient Rome*, Macaulay changes Horatius' status slightly from the aforementioned "farmer-

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soldier" to "the Captain of the Gate", but he leaves out any mention of family titles or background. Also, Horatius receives the same reward, farmland, for his bravery *in the Lays of Ancient Rome* as he does in the *Ab Urbe Condita*. Despite his new title in Macaulay's account, Horatius' reward implies that he still originates from a lower social standing. This would make Horatius a lower social standing than Lartius and Herminius, but slightly higher than he is in Livy's account. This ties into Macaulay's Whig political agenda since he advocates for expanded voting rights for the middle class, but not universal suffrage. Unlike Livy's version of the Horatius Cocles story, Macaulay uses the class difference between Horatius and his helpers to prove a political point about class unity that was decidedly not part of Livy's original meaning. With this slight alteration to Livy's original story, Macaulay sets up the remainder of the poem to conform to his ideals regarding suffrage and class unity.

Moreover, Macaulay decides to increase Lartius and Herminius' roles in his version of the story which contradicts the characterization Livy creates for them in the *Ab Urbe Condita*. When Livy introduces the two men that stood with Horatius, he says, "*duos tamen cum eo pudor tenuit, Sp. Larcium ac T. Herminium, ambos claros genere factisque.*"² Livy emphasizes their motivation of preemptive shame– the shame they would have felt if they had not defended the bridge from the invading Etruscans – to distinguish them in character from Horatius who fought for the sake of Rome. Livy's description of Lartius and Herminius' reasons for fighting parallels the Etruscan enemy's

² Livy, AUC 2.10.6: "Nevertheless shame held two men with him, Spurius Lartius and Titus Herminius, both shining in birth and deeds.

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reason for fighting; he even uses the word “pudor” *shame* for both. Lartius, Herminius, and the Etruscans share the same motivation for fighting: Horatius’ brave actions inspired and embarrassed them. Their descriptions contrast Horatius’ cause for fighting, further setting Horatius apart from the other characters in the story and emphasizing his exemplum status. Macaulay’s account of the Horatius Cocles story does not mention the shame that motivated Lartius and Herminius to fight alongside Horatius. Instead, he includes shame in his characterization of the Etruscans. When Horatius challenges the Etruscans to fight, Macaulay adds the following about the Etruscans:

“But at his [Horatius’] haughty challenge
A sullen murmur ran,
Mingled of wrath, and shame, and dread,
Along that glittering van.
There lacked not men of prowess,
Nor men of lordly race;
For all Etruria’s noblest
Were round the fatal place.”
(Macaulay, *Lays of Ancient Rome* 1.48)

These lines demonstrate Macaulay’s willingness to use shame to characterize the Etruscans, but not the three Roman men guarding the bridge, thus highlighting a critical difference in motivation between Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome* and Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita*. While Livy creates a story to praise Horatius Cocles as an exemplum for the Roman people, Macaulay tweaks the story to commend all three men by assigning Lartius and Herminius the same motivation to fight as Horatius. Macaulay uses this established class difference between Horatius and his helpers to prove a political point about the advantages of class unity. In the following stanza from the *Lays of Ancient Rome*, Macaulay changes the characterization of

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Lartius and Herminius from Livy's account to be equally brave as Horatius:

“Back darted Spurius Lartius;
Herminius darted back:
And, as they passed, beneath their feet
They felt the timbers crack.
But when they turned their faces,
And on the farther shore
Saw brave Horatius stand alone,
They would have crossed once more.”
(Macaulay, *Lays of Ancient Rome* 1.54)

In this final line, if taken in earnest, Macaulay recharacterizes Lartius and Herminius as just as brave and loyal to Rome as Horatius since they both would have stayed on the bridge to defend Rome if they knew Horatius would continue to fight. By recharacterizing Lartius and Herminius as equally courageous, Macaulay highlights the group's combined efforts as exceptional. This relates to his Whig agenda because it establishes a smaller-scale example of the benefits of class unity that Macaulay expects his readers to connect back to their present time. Macaulay's heroic portrayal of these men attempts to instill a desire for collaboration in his audience that ultimately serves his political agenda.

Additionally, in the *Lays of Ancient Rome*, Macaulay changes who orders Lartius and Herminius back to safety. Livy states that Horatius tells Lartius and Herminius to leave him. In the *Ab Urbe Condita*, Livy writes: *circumferens inde truces minaciter oculos ad proceres Etruscorum nunc singulos prouocare, nunc increpare omnes: seruitia regum superborum, suae libertatis immemores alienam oppugnatum uenire.*³

³ Livy, *AUC* 2.10.8: “But after a while he [Horatius] forced even these two [Lartius and Herminius] to leave him and save themselves, for there was scarcely anything left of the bridge, and those who were cutting it down called to them to come back.”

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Macaulay changes this to the on-looking Roman fathers call back all three men, instead of Horatius ordering Lartius and Herminius. Immediately preceding Lartius and Herminius' decision to cross the bridge back to safety, Macaulay writes:

“Come back, come back, Horatius!
Loud cried the Fathers all.
'Back, Lartius! back, Herminius!
Back, ere the ruin fall!’”
(Macaulay, *Lays of Ancient Rome* 1.53)

These minor yet significant changes that Macaulay makes to Livy's version completely change the characterization of Lartius and Herminius, practically equating them to Horatius Cocles in valor. Macaulay's alterations reinforce his message about class unity as he has two upper-class men fight alongside a man of lower social status with equal vigor for the safety of Rome. This decision attempts to parallel the political state of England at the time of Macaulay's work when the Whigs in the mid-19th century fought for increased representation of middle-class individuals. His choice also contradicts Livy's characterization of Horatius himself as Livy directly calls Horatius the, "*unus uir fuisset, Horatius Cocles; id munimentum illo die fortuna urbis Romanae habuit.*"⁴ In this moment, Livy singles out Horatius Cocles from the beginning as an exemplum (Roller 81). Arguably, by exalting Lartius and Herminius similarly to Horatius, Macaulay transfers the exemplum status to all three of the men, and he applies the purpose of creating exemplum—namely so that others will imitate their actions—to the collective actions of the three. In short, Macaulay attempts to give Lartius and Herminius "exempla" status so that the

⁴ Livy *AUC* 2.10.2: "He was the one man, Horatius Cocles; he held the defense on that day for the fortune of the Roman city."

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message of the *Lays of Ancient Rome* becomes about uniting through class boundaries against a common enemy, in Macaulay's case, unequal voting rights).

Although some may argue that Lartius and Herminius still play a considerably smaller role in the story than Horatius given the title and content, Macaulay kept the other characters in the Horatius Cocles story the same as in Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*. Most notably, Macaulay still characterizes Horatius as the noblest by leaving the rest of the story intact, and Lars Porsena still displays his odd affection for the Romans as he does in Livy's account. For example, in the Cloelia story from the same book of the *Ab Urbe Condita*, Livy writes that Porsena regarding Cloelia's brave actions was "deinde in admirationem" (Livy, *AUC* 2.13.8: then in admiration). This characterization of Lars Porsena remains consistent in Macaulay's telling of the Horatius Cocles story as he writes when Horatius has jumped into the river:

"Heaven help him [*Horatius*]!" quoth Lars Porsena
"And bring him safe to shore;
For such a gallant feat of arms
Was never seen before."
(Macaulay, *Lays of Ancient Rome* 1.63)

In these lines, Macaulay leaves the characterization of Lars Porsena intact from Livy's account, highlighting the discrepancies in Macaulay's account of Lartius and Herminius. Macaulay's choice to change Lartius and Herminius' roles in the story, even slightly, suggests that it serves his overall purpose in composing the *Lays of Ancient Rome*. Furthermore, Macaulay's audience for his series of ballads includes university-educated people given his extensive references to classical texts (McKelvy, 297). With that in mind, it is reasonable to assume that any educated person in the 1800s might recognize major

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differences to the Horatius Cocles story, causing them to reevaluate the piece's purpose altogether. By changing the story slightly but purposefully, Macaulay can effectively convince his audience that the original story from Livy included a deeper meaning about fighting class disparity. Furthermore, by retelling this story, Macaulay can use the authority of ancient Roman values to support his Whig agenda even though he added messages about class unity himself.

Idealizing Ancient Rome

Throughout the Horatius episode, Macaulay idealizes ancient Rome to create a comparison between a perfect Rome without class division and a flawed Britain with class division. The greatest example of this occurs when Macaulay breaks from the narrative when Horatius— alongside Lartius and Herminius— orders the Romans to destroy the bridge, a moment of peak tension, to say:

"Then none was for a party;
Then all were for the state;
Then the great man helped the poor,
And the poor man loved the great:
Then lands were fairly portioned;
Then spoils were fairly sold:
The Romans were like brothers
In the brave days of old."
(Macaulay *Lays of Ancient Rome* 1.32)

These lines, which stray from Livy's account, represent the idealization of Rome (Schulz, 61). Macaulay forms a bond between middle-class Horatius and noble-born Lartius and Herminius to represent an ideal nation without class divide. In breaking this down further, the first two lines reference the dissolution of political parties to strengthen a nation, in Macaulay's case, Britain. At this point in ancient Rome, political parties did not exist in the same way we recognize them in the

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present day, so the reference here to the absence of parties must be taken as a direct reference to the political state of Britain. Lines three and four in this stanza refer to the growing concern of class disparity in Britain. Furthermore, lines five and six reference the Reform Bill of 1832, which disenfranchised rotten boroughs and lowered property requirements to vote resulting in greater representation for Britain's middle-class citizens. Finally, the last two lines of the stanza again invoke the idealization of ancient Rome which promotes Whig ideology to Macaulay's readers as the Romans achieved such greatness by already having what the Whig Reform Bills promised.

Not only does Macaulay idealize ancient Rome, but in the following stanza he compares ancient Roman citizens to British citizens before the enactment of Whig reforms. Macaulay writes:

"Now Roman is to Roman
More hateful than a foe,
And the Tribunes beard the high,
And the Fathers grind the low.
As we wax hot in faction,
In battle we wax cold:
Wherefore men fight not as they fought
In the brave days of old."
(Macaulay *Lays of Ancient Rome* 1.33)

In these lines, which also stray from Livy's account of Horatius Cocles since Livy had no reason or ability to include a reference to 19th-century Britain, Macaulay compares individuals in ancient Rome to individuals in his present-day Britain. The use of the word "now" to start the stanza which contrasts Macaulay's use of "then" throughout the previous stanza indicates this time and location jump (Schulz, 61). The first two lines here reference the class tension over voting representation in the 1830s. Also, Macaulay's use of the word "Roman" reminds his audience of their shared national identity

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as despite being in different economic and social classes, they are all British. This demonstrates a common conflict resolution strategy by reminding the two opposing sides of their commonalities. The next two lines specifically reference economic classes and how upper-class individuals benefit from the “tribunes” and the disadvantages placed on the lower class. Lines five and six mention how the conflict between classes in Britain is so intense that they have lost their military prowess outside of the internal conflict. These lines combine with the final two lines of the stanza to create a “call to action” for Macaulay’s audience to end the class disparity in Britain so the country can return to the former greatness found in the idealized city of ancient Rome.

Conclusion

Throughout the Horatius episode of *Lays of Ancient Rome*, Macaulay changes and adds to Livy’s narrative of the events to highlight his concerns about voting representation in Britain. By increasing Lartius and Herminius’ roles, Macaulay alters the meaning of the original Horatius Cocles story so that instead of characterizing Horatius as a sole exemplum as Livy does, he effectively makes the trio into a combined exemplum. Macaulay recharacterizes Lartius and Herminius as equally courageous as Horatius to demonstrate the benefits of class unity by highlighting their combined efforts even though they originate from different social classes. In addition to changing Lartius and Herminius’ characters, Macaulay idealizes ancient Rome as a place without class conflict. As shown in stanzas 32 and 33, Macaulay compares the idealized ancient Rome to his present day in Britain, claiming that the Romans fought together against a common enemy, but the British, whom he refers to as the

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Romans now, fight each other instead. With this comparison, Macaulay emphasizes what he perceives as deficiencies in British society and calls for a return to the ideals of ancient Rome. By recharacterizing Lartius and Herminius and idealizing the values of ancient Rome in comparison to 1830s Britain, Macaulay creates a new meaning, if only slightly different from the original, for the Horatius Cocles narrative that highlights issues surrounding class disparity and promotes the British Whig ideas in favor of increased voting representation.

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